

PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE OUTSET

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Abstract

What are the elements of professional learning that lead to an increase of the likelihood of new learning and understandings being embedded into teacher practices? This article details some of the strategies the author has successfully employed to establish a context whereby an innovation would be sustained past the time of the Ministry Gifted and Talented Education contract. A 'wedge model' was adopted so that over time, the balance of responsibility and power shifted from her as facilitator, to the staff through a range of collaborative processes.

Keywords

Gifted education; reflection; convening; professional learning

Introduction

Gifted and talented students are found across the full spectrum of learners, including students from low socio-economic families and from different cultural groups. All state schools are required to identify this group of students and implement strategies that will meet their special learning, social and emotional needs. The National Administration Guideline (NAG) 1 (iii)c requires:

... schools to use good quality assessment information to identify students who have special needs (including gifted and talented), and to develop and implement teaching and learning strategies to meet the needs of these students. (Ministry of Education, 2013)

This article describes my experiences as a facilitator in one school that was part of the Ministry of Education (MOE) Gifted and Talented Education (GaTE) contract. It draws on understandings of the sigmoid nature of the path of change (see Hipkins & Cowie, this issue) to describe and understand the trajectory of the implementation, ownership and growth of GaTE principles within the school. From the outset, all decisions and actions were collaboratively contested to ensure that the staff were well-placed to continue to improve school-wide practices and make sound decisions for gifted individuals and/or groups of gifted learners post-contract. A 'wedge model' was adopted so that over time, the balance of responsibility and power would intentionally shift from the me, the facilitator, to the staff in an attempt to increase the likelihood that the initiative would be sustained at the conclusion of the contract. In what follows, various stages of the professional learning strategy are plotted against the different areas of the sigmoid curve.

The context for change

School A is a Year 0–6 urban school located in a high socio-economic coastal suburb. The school roll is approximately 400 students, of which 8 percent identify as Māori, and 15 percent from a mixture of other ethnicities. There are 12 fee-paying students.

At the time of writing, School A was in the second year of a New Zealand MOE GaTE contract where all staff members were expected to participate in all professional learning sessions. I had worked with the school eight years prior to this, so effective relationships had already been established. Professional learning, over the previous two-year period, was mainly focussed on building teachers' generic knowledge and understanding of giftedness and talent. The principal and Board of Trustees were highly committed to, and very supportive of, school involvement in GaTE professional learning. The leadership team felt that the teachers had begun to make changes in practice but there was more to do to engage all the school's gifted learners. The deputy principal undertook the role of GaTE coordinator and a GaTE team (representative of all syndicates) was established to lead the learning

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from within the school. A team approach was adopted from the outset because not only was ‘the whole seen to be greater than the sum of its parts’ but also a major goal was that GaTE learning and implementation would continue irrespective of staff changes. The choice of members of the GaTE team was pivotal as each team member had specific responsibilities so individually accountable for actions or lack of.

This time, priority for the school’s professional learning was to focus on catering for gifted and talented students through differentiated learning and teaching opportunities within mainstream classes, and to be responsive to other individual needs as identified. The objective of the GaTE professional learning was to assist *all* teachers to better meet the needs of gifted and talented students. The GaTE team considered that by enabling gifted students to reach their potential academically, socially and emotionally the performance for all students would be enhanced. Hence, from the outset of the professional learning, sustainability was at the forefront of decision-making. All decisions aimed to ensure that the staff was well-placed to continue to improve school-wide practices post-contract.

The staff had previously adopted a school-wide definition of gifted and talented learners, as proposed by Riley, Bevan-Brown, Bicknell, Carroll-Lind, and Kearney (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 176), after much discussion and debate. This liberal definition recognised six broad areas of giftedness and talent comprising:

- intellectual;
- creativity (refers to students with general creative abilities);
- expression through the visual and performing arts;
- social/leadership;
- culture-specific abilities and qualities; and
- expression through physical/sport.

This paper records the intentional actions taken to build teacher knowledge and understanding of Gifted and Talented Education in order for the change in practice to become embedded into the school’s culture.

Collective knowledge building

During the initial period of the GaTE contract there was an overlap with another MOE contract, *Learning with Digital Technologies* (LwDT). The GaTE and LwDT facilitators, and the school’s GaTE team discussed how best to dovetail the learning from the two contracts to ensure that teachers were not overwhelmed, and to avoid potentially conflicting messages. A private consultant provided professional learning about ‘student agency’.

The school staff and professional developers together decided to put accelerating writing at the centre of the in-school focus and to wrap LwDT, GaTE and student agency around the writing so that the learning would be streamlined for teachers. Teachers appreciated this commenting:

(The facilitator) made herself available to us and was very open to fitting in with current areas of development to avoid adding an extra workload.

... deliberately looking at other areas of our school PD and marrying the areas of focus so that the learning complemented each other. It makes the PLD a comprehensive and linked package rather than a series of isolated ideas.

Throughout the professional learning, the staff’s focus on the needs of gifted and talented learners was a high priority. The GaTE team was honest about workload, and decisions were made according to what else was happening in the school. The GaTE team co-ordinated all professional learning to integrate with GaTE and vice versa and to ensure a coherent approach. The staff much appreciated this dovetailed approach for professional learning, with comments such as, “we have been encouraged to think ‘GaTE’ in all curriculum planning” and “lots of staff meetings/PD have focussed on GaTE learning”. Teachers were encouraged to underpin all their planning with gifted education principles as a way of supporting the well being and achievement of all learners. School wide, a variety of strategies were implemented to cater for this group. One leader stated;

Discussion as a management team about how we can best cater for the needs of the accelerated learners ... we need to allow like-minded students to work together more regularly to enable them the stimulation and higher order thinking opportunities.

This is the stage when I, as the GaTE facilitator, was most active in introducing new ideas through shared readings, modelling being a learner and building teachers' confidence in their own expertise. As a facilitator, I was definitely acting as the/an expert and thinking about how best to introduce new and potentially unsettling knowledge. I was always mindful of the potential for rejection/going backwards.

It was imperative that I listened attentively in order to understand the 'status quo' at School A and ensure that the professional learning would be responsive to staff needs. It was also important to acknowledge that staff members knew their students and context best. One staff member recognised this had been acknowledged stating:

Encouragement and assurance was given that we are knowledgeable about this already as we know our own students best.

As positive relationships had already been established teachers actively contributed ideas, debated relevant readings and problem solved collaboratively:

[The facilitator] was able to establish a rapport between staff with her open non-threatening manner. We were able to discuss our misconceptions/opinions; and always worthwhile and thought provoking staff meetings and know we are always going to be involved in really meaningful, authentic, purposeful activities.

Staff were provided with pertinent readings/research to assist them to build the knowledge base and inform school wide action. The teachers had not read widely on New Zealand research into gifted education, so most were not familiar with the resources available. The updated handbook *Gifted and Talented: Meeting their needs in New Zealand schools* (Ministry of Education, 2012) was most commonly used. Complementary international research was sourced when needed. One leader stated, "opportunities to read and discuss/report back on suggested readings have increased our awareness and been a really valuable part of our collaborative learning".

As often as possible open source readings and or links to reading materials were distributed for staff to have read prior to workshops. One leader commented:

[The facilitator] provides relevant readings for staff to complete before the staff meetings, so they come ready to share/feedback/discuss.

The readings provided a springboard for debate. My role was to design purposeful questions and discussion starters to challenge thinking, surface different perspectives and to empower the staff to develop research-informed solutions. I felt that this approach would lead to more staff engagement, deeper dialogue and understanding, and ultimately more effective decision-making for gifted and talented students.

As facilitator, an inquiry-minded disposition was modelled and my own professional inquiry and puzzles of practice were shared revealing vulnerability, while simultaneously convincing the staff that the professional inquiry process had merit. I often did not know the solution and 'was outside comfort zone', was honest about that, and worked through challenges in partnership with the staff. I made a commitment to find and distribute appropriate research for reflection, and discussion at the next workshop, if the group faltered and lacked ideas. It was felt that this was good modelling of 'self as a learner'. Both years I also enrolled in a Masters paper and shared the learning with the teachers when and as appropriate.

Google Drive was another strategy used for creating and sharing resources to develop the school's ability to sustain change. This strategy supported sharing and collaboration and ensured transparency for all stakeholders. Transparency was seen as critical to guarantee that participants were fully informed on every aspect of the professional learning. To this end, the record-taker role rotated during workshops with the minutes always available on a shared document for all to access and be able to amend/add comments as necessary.

The principle of *ako/reciprocity* meant that all stakeholders in the discussion had equal voice and that different perspectives would enrich the understanding of each group member. At times, there was a tension where the facilitator challenged existing beliefs and practices when in conflict with research informed best practice. Staff members valued this, noting:

Very practical in her contributions with a sound theory base. Challenged teacher thinking around GaTE and other aspects of pedagogy' and 'I appreciate the way that Janet makes me think about differing viewpoints and I have never had that with any professional learning before.

A learner-centred model was adopted where the facilitator and the GaTE team worked collaboratively to determine what was best for individual learners, both adults and children. At each workshop, staff shared their prior knowledge before they were involved in the new learning. I constantly 'stepped out of role' to make overt strategies that could be transferred into classroom practice, teachers commenting:

Continuous modelling of different strategies to use in the classroom; and Janet has continued to provide practical new ideas in manageable increments over a number of sessions as well as re-visiting/consolidating material from previous sessions.

I deemed important an inclusive and culturally responsive approach that would meet the needs of the diverse range of School A's learners, including cultural perspectives of giftedness and talent. It was critical for staff to learn about Māori perspectives, because 8 percent of the school's population identified as Māori. Cultural perspectives presented a challenge for me, and one example of a misunderstanding was where the majority of staff previously thought Maori perspectives were the same as pākehā perspectives with a cultural 'add-on'. To understand that to allow Māori to succeed as Māori, the cultural lens needed to be changed if gifts and talents for Māori were to surface, be recognised and nurtured, took a few workshops, lots of reading/videos and much intense discussion. My role in this was to structure the workshops so that individuals would engage and be mutually respectful of contributions, and encourage the creation of a culture of commitment, shared decision-making and individual and shared ownership of learning.

Shifting the balance of power

As staff began to engage more actively with the ideas, I took action to deliberately shift the balance of power and decision making to them. This 'wedge model' meant that over time my facilitation role reduced and leadership from the GaTE team increased. One school leader stated:

Janet's role was to front load with information and now two years down the track she is stepping back for the school to use the information and make decisions on direction. Janet has always been very mindful of the need for the school to build capacity for GaTE to continue once the contract is finished.

A planning partnership developed where the collective wisdom of the group was utilised for planning, problem finding and problem solving. Over time the GaTE team collaboratively planned workshops before eventually other staff members were encouraged to co-plan, facilitate or co-facilitate workshops in their areas of expertise. At times, this happened at short notice but every consideration was given to ensure each staff member was comfortable leading the learning, with or without support. Increasingly, staff members were confident to and led interactive workshops on various aspects of the professional learning. I attended planning meetings as a group participant, initially scaffolding the process and offering suggestions, but over time that reduced to an observer's role. This shift was important given one goal was to grow leaders across the school and ensure every teacher had equal voice throughout. During this period, discussions always focussed on how to ensure continuous improvement, "We are now equipped with the knowledge from discussion and academic readings to ensure that as a staff we can continue the journey to support our GaTE students".

The school's leadership team's active support was significant both in terms of time and resourcing. Each GaTE team member was allocated release time to review and co-plan staff meetings, determine direction for the professional learning and each had specific responsibilities. The principal explained this was to "drive the changes needed in our school ... giving the GaTE team 'time' to review and

plan for staff meetings and refine the action plan". One of the GaTE leaders described the team goal as "steering GaTE towards being a continuous consideration as our school has a lot of (gifted) students and it is relevant for us to be using GaTE principles constantly in our teaching and learning programmes".

Staff also trialled and adopted a process called 'convening'. This has been described as producing energy through the engagement of the participants as equals (Brookfield, 1995). The purpose of this process is not the production of shared understandings but, rather, the offering and receiving of different perspectives and insights. Brookfield (1995) fittingly encapsulates the aim of this process as one of 'hunting assumptions'. Convening works well within transformational leadership practice by supporting participants to share concerns and questions in a way that enables insight and new thinking and prompts new lines of inquiry. It involves deliberate actions to encourage all staff members to contribute and draws upon the collective wisdom of the group to collaboratively problem-solve puzzles of practice. I considered that three main objectives could be achieved through the convening process:

- to grow personal learning for each individual while contributing to the learning of others and the group;
- to build a professional learning group to support GaTE team that would continue post-contract; and
- to encourage staff to build practices within the school and the local community that were sustainable post-contract.

The convening process helped individuals clarify and generate potential solutions for individual puzzles of practice. The participants, by taking an active part in the process, discovered that it is within their power to resolve issues, or at least progress them. This process grew leaders across the school valuing the importance of every teacher having equal voice. One leader commented "Convening opportunities to share any difficulties or problems and sharing the collective wisdom of colleagues, is a very powerful approach, and one which we intend to use more readily/frequently".

Over time, leading the learning during convening sessions was transferred to members of the GaTE team. On one memorable occasion a second year teacher facilitated a convening session. During this time, a school leader was picked up for not following the convening protocols, which was no mean feat for a new graduate! Over time, the staff realised that together they had the power to create a better future for their school, one where both students and teachers were actively engaged in learning and where they wanted to be.

School A also held a parents' meeting at which the GaTE team presented decisions that had been made. This strategy was intended to ensure the GaTE principles were understood and accepted by the school community. Parents were given the opportunity to provide feedback and offer suggestions/improvements and constructive criticism. It was hoped that the involvement of the wider community would invite more community support and make sustainability much more likely. Traditionally, parent workshops had not been well attended. This meeting was held at 8.00 am with crèche facilities available in an attempt to draw a larger group of parents. There was a slight increase in attendance, which was deemed by staff to have been successful. There was also talk of parent representatives attending GaTe workshops in future, which was considered to have merit.

Members of the GaTE team attended Bay of Plenty GaTE cluster meetings to learn from and with other teachers and build across-school networks. The aim of these meetings was to develop a wider support system that would sustain the GaTE programmes in the different schools across the region. The GaTE team valued these meetings as the new learning provided plenty of ideas and opportunities to lead the learning back at their school.

Laying the ground for the next growth phase

Teachers showed commitment to ongoing professional learning through increased agency and trialling and sharing different approaches. Teacher involvement demonstrated that there had been a strategic shift in balance of power and authority. Evidence of the change process included:

- More teacher discussions about meeting the needs of a diverse range of gifted learners.
- A focus on high ability students for example “writing programme has been restructured to more closely consider and address the needs of GaTE students, and ‘differentiated groupings ... in extending the bright ones and challenging them’”.
- Increased differentiation for gifted and talented students with an expectation that “team planning for programmes always have a GaTE component in them”.
- Increased student agency “More child input into their learning: what they wish to learn and how they would like to go about it” and “I have made an effort to acknowledge those GaTE students and give them open ended activities so they remain enthused and excited to learn and (willing to) share their learning”.
- More awareness of the variety of gifted and talented learners: “I have become more willing to stop and think about what might be going on behind what a child presents” and “more effort to find the ‘spark’ or key for those disengaged learners with obvious (or sometime not so obvious!) ability”.
- More acceleration opportunities for groups as and when needed and “when appropriate, cross group to enable ‘like minds’ to work together”.

Overall, teachers’ comments indicated a deeper understanding of the range of giftedness and talent, and that giftedness could flourish under the right conditions. Teachers understood that ‘a rising tide lifts all ships’ (Renzulli, 1998), recognising that implementing gifted education principles can be effective in surfacing and bringing about significant progress for a variety of students. One teacher remarked “it is relevant for us to be using GaTE principles constantly in our teaching and learning programmes for all students because we don’t know which ones are gifted in that particular area”.

There was also increased awareness of the need for gifted learners to have ‘equitable access to differentiated and culturally responsive provisions’ (Riley et al., 2012). Teacher inquiries demonstrated better understanding of the specialised needs of twice exceptional (2e)—students who are both gifted and learning disabled. Teacher comments reflected this “discussion about 2e learners is more frequent and focussed” and “2e children often need the extra support to access the curriculum”. Although Māori perspectives of giftedness and talent were introduced, more professional learning around this (and other cultural perspectives) was required.

Support from colleagues was also seen to be a powerful enabler with reflection, along with planning underpinned by GaTE principles, and sharing leading to improvement in practice. The leadership team was aware that they needed to encourage staff to share successes and celebrate accordingly to encourage others to risk take and trial new ideas. Among the enablers that allowed teachers to make these changes was deprivatising own practice (team teaching, classroom visits) ‘sharing examples of best practise’ and ‘the senior leaders encouraging staff to make changes and celebrate successes’.

Concluding comments and insights for action

Change does not happen by accident, nor is it a linear process. The GaTE work described in this article incorporated a range of strategies aimed at increasing the chances of school/teacher planning and practices being underpinned by the principles of gifted education, and of the developments being sustained beyond the facilitator’s contract work. The facilitation process included rigorous planning and design of workshops to ensure these ignited deep thinking and learning for all. Convening proved to be a powerful catalyst that led to increased ownership and active involvement of teachers and leaders. The ‘wedge model’ for shifting responsibility and power, coupled with access to New Zealand research, was key to provoking thinking and at times challenge existing practices. Facilitator modeling ambiguity encouraged the early adopters to risk-take and these teachers subsequently trialed changes in their own practice. As changes in pedagogy took place, the risk-taking staff shared their experiences, which motivated others to trial small changes. Successes were celebrated and mis-steps and unsuccessful ventures discussed which led to more acceptance from others. The de-privatisation of practice encouraged more open discussions along with greater depth of reflection and analysis of what worked and why/ why not so that the rate of spread of change increased.

Linking this experience to the sigmoid shape of change, it would seem that work on the plateau to

establish the conditions for open collaboration, to develop a shared knowledge base and repertoire for possible (and successful) action, and to empower teachers as leaders was central to the success of the partnership between the facilitator and staff. As these aspects reached a critical mass in terms of teacher commitment and expertise the spread of change and teacher engagement with change accelerated—a development that is represented by the upswing of the sigmoid curve.

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